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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 002382

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SUBJECT: SHARON OPTIONS IN REFERENDUM RUN-UP

REF: TEL AVIV 2328

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) With six days to go until Likud's May 2 referendum on his disengagement plan, inaction by three nominally supportive but reluctant key Likud ministers, and narrowing but still winning poll numbers, PM Sharon has available a menu of tactics from which to draw. Most Israeli poll results come out only on Fridays, so Sharon must weigh whether the downward trend in Likud support evidenced over the past several weeks (reftel) is continuing through these final days before the vote. Sharon will gear his sometimes contradictory comments and actions for each audience, leaving voters to pick their issues of greatest concern and to speculate, for instance, on whether he would, alternatively, resign over a referendum loss, as son Omri has suggested, or push ahead without Likud support.

2. (C) Sharon's available tactics include:

-- Beginning with his Independence Day speech April 27, Sharon is apt to embark on a major series of statements stressing again that failure to pursue his withdrawal plan will cost Israel the President's landmark assurances on refugees and settlements. He will likely stress again, as he did to last week's special Knesset session, the magnitude of those USG assurances, both positively for Israel, and more important for some Likud factions, negatively for the Palestinians.

-- He will also likely deploy to the stump Defense Minister and disengagement supporter Shaul Mofaz and COS Moshe Ya'alon to stress the security bona fides of the plan.

-- Equally important, he will continue to underscore, as he did in statements published April 26, the potential harm to the U.S.-Israel relationship in the event that Likudniks spurn the President's support.

-- In doing so, Sharon may refer again to the fact that the Likud vote is non-binding, although the claim cuts both ways: some potential supporters are apt to decide there's no need to vote since Sharon will go ahead even absent a win, and some fence-straddlers could conclude that they could register a protest without derailing the PM's plan. In any event, Sharon can point to overwhelming support throughout the Israeli public for Gaza withdrawal, stress the insignificance of removing the four remote West Bank settlements when compared to permanently securing the major blocs, and allude to the possibility that he may push ahead even in the face of a Likud defeat.

-- He may, even at the same time, hint that he is tying his own premiership to the plan. As son Omri has done already, he can point to the centrality of the plan to his leadership -- what he will suggest is the only Israeli leadership in 56 years that has won such support on refugees and settlements -- although that resignation yields as much public skepticism as it does concern.

-- Sharon will almost certainly maintain as tightly as possible the lockdown of the territories, seeking to avoid a multiple casualties terror attack that could sway fence-sitting Likud voters against withdrawal.

-- Should the on-the-ground intelligence present him with the opportunity, Sharon could immediately target the new Gaza Hamas leaders, reinforcing his position among the critical hard right in Likud. In a much longer reach that would require fortuitous, timely intelligence, and given the USG's ban on the easier-to-hit Arafat, he could conceivably reach out against Damascus-based Hamas leader Meshaal.

-- Sharon will almost certainly explore the price that reluctant ministers Bibi Netanyahu, Silvan Shalom and Limor Livnat will seek to actively campaign for the plan.

-- Sharon could also decide to complete the West Bank separation barrier so as to connect now all segments of the fence deep into the West Bank settlement blocs such as Ariel, in each case counting on USG acquiescence to such unilateral amendment as steps necessary to "save" the withdrawal plan.

-- Were more time available, Sharon might seek additional USG

assurances, such as on Jerusalem -- or release from some aspects of his commitments, but the time is too short. Should the referendum results be close -- either a narrow win or a narrow defeat -- Sharon could, however, claim the need for further Israeli gains as the condition for moving forward on withdrawal.

13. (C) Pollster Hanoach Smith told poloff April 26 that, on the basis of results from a private poll he is in the process of carrying out, and the narrowing voter margin notwithstanding, he sees the Sharon withdrawal plan "squeaking by" May 2. Pollster Avinoam Brog also predicted a Sharon win. He noted that the big problem facing pollsters on this issue is the significant number of Likud members who decline to provide a response -- as opposed to being undecided. He said that, intuitively, he sees a "pendulum effect" by which Likud voters initially saw the Sharon plan as a chance for progress, then became frightened at the prospect of actually withdrawing and appearing weak. The next stage, he suggested, could be that these same Likud voters step back and ask themselves whether they "want to go on with terror..." and opt to support the withdrawal plan May 2. Brog said the back-to-back combination of Israel's Fallen Heroes Day and Independence Day presents "a very sharp moment" where Israelis move from mourning death to dancing for joy. The prospect of achieving the good times that Israelis wish to live will nibble at them this week, he said.

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